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story of the original wolf princess ...

The WOLF CUB

THE VOLKONSKY WINTER PALACE, RUSSIA 1905

It was such a stupid word. Such a stupid thing for Dasha to call her.

Even as the word escaped from the maid's winter-chapped lips, she clapped her hand to her mouth, as if she could swallow what she had just said. Her expression of shock was so comical that at any other time Sofya would have doubled up laughing.

‘Forgive me,’ Dasha cried, shaking her head fiercely. ‘I didn’t know what I was saying.’

Sofya considered feeling sorry for her. She took a step towards the girl, and took her hand – that dear hand, with its short, stubby fingers. She raised it to her lips in the formal gesture of forgiveness. Relief swept across Dasha’s face. She looked Sofya straight in the eyes, her face trusting.

The scream, when Sofya bit her, was terrifying.

Dasha snatched her hand free, howling in pain as she wrapped it in her apron, and ran to the small door that led to the palace's service tunnels. She pressed the door's catch, dipped her body to climb inside, then looked back. Tears ran down her pink cheeks, the pain and hurt clear for Sofya to see.

Sofya stood quite still. She would not say sorry.

The door slid shut.

Sofya sat on the edge of her bed. There would be a row: no one was going to be pleased with a girl who bit her maid, especially one as sweet and kind and trusting as Dasha. Sofya would be called to the library, the vast Volkonsky library, where her godfather the prince spent his days. She thought about his deep-set but kindly eyes peering over his pince-nez at her, with a look of bewilderment and disappointment that would chill her more than a heavy frost.

So what! She felt defiant. She would stand her ground and demand that Dasha apologise, too. If it was wrong of Sofya to bite her, it was worse that Dasha told lies! No one could use that word and expect to get away with it. No one would ever use that word about her.

Orphan.

Sofya folded her arms around her body. She looked at her doll, the last present her mother had sent her from home, slumped at an angle in a button-backed chair. The unblinking glass eyes, fringed with fine painted lashes, stared out into the room. The doll had once had long, luxurious black ringlets, but Sofya had taken her under

the nursery table and methodically cut off every single one. She wasn't sure why she had done that – had she thought the hair would grow again? – but the joy as she had sat under the heavy chenille cloth and quietly snipped away was worth the telling-off by her nurse.

She allowed herself to think about her mother. How she wore her hair in a knot on the top of her head, soft brown curls escaping from her hairpins and hanging over the tiny pearl buttons on the neck of her lace blouse. A dreadful thought . . . was that doll her mother's blessing, like in the story of Vasilissa the Beautiful? She remembered how Vasilissa's dying mother had given her a doll with eyes that shone like diamonds, and how the doll had protected the girl, even arranged for her to marry a handsome prince. Sofya had loved that story, and would beg her mother to tell it to her over and over again . . .

She kicked the chair. Fool! She didn't need a doll as a blessing. She had her mother to look after her.

Unless . . .

She tried to think how long it would take for Dasha to run to the Under Palace kitchen, for her mother to calm Dasha's wild sobbing so that she could tell her family what Sofya had done. Even now, they were probably saying it was impossible, that Sofya would never do such a thing. Would Dasha's mother be calling the footman, or Prince Volkonsky's private secretary? Sofya strained her ears. She would be summoned soon. Her nurse was visiting her family, not due back for another month, so Sofya would be entirely alone against the palace and the prince.

She tried whistling to pass the time, but the sound was

breathy and flat, not the jaunty sound she was aiming for. She tapped her feet on the floor. Perhaps this interminable wait was part of her punishment, like when a bowl of sugar had gone missing from the White Dining Room and no one would admit to it. The prince had explained to her that if she knew anything about it, she should say – otherwise Pyotr, the young under-footman, might be blamed. But Sofya hadn't been able to tell the prince that she was the thief. After all, the sugar hadn't been for her: she had taken it as a treat for the old horse who drove her to the frozen lake to skate. The groom had said the horse was off his food. Every few days, the prince would ask her if she knew anything about the theft, telling her that Pyotr was still a suspect, and Sofya saw herself how the young man was affected, his once open, happy face becoming closed and careworn. After a week, Sofya could bear it no longer. She had run to the library and confessed.

Orphan.

Why had Dasha used that word? About Sofya? To be an orphan, you had to have no parents. And she had a mother and a father, she was sure. She knitted her fingers together, laid them in her lap. She had been sent to the palace while her mother got strong again and her father stopped being so tired, that was all. True, everything had changed after her little brother, Alyosha, had died. But he was very small, hardly born at all, and her mother had promised her that when you were very little, dying was like falling asleep. She remembered being told this; how she had buried her head in her mother's blouse, feeling around the back of her neck for the tiny pearl buttons.

Sofya felt sad about Alyosha, but she was more upset that her mother would not stop crying.

Not long afterwards, she was brought here . . . such a long journey. Everyone was kind to her. She had a nurse, and Dasha to help her dress. A tutor came from St Petersburg so she wouldn't fall behind in her lessons, and a governess was soon to arrive from England. But then, one afternoon, before the snows came, Sofya had been summoned from the schoolroom and the prince had spoken to her quietly. What had he said? Your parents are at peace. But that could mean anything, surely? Her nurse had been kind to her that night, allowed her to go to bed without brushing her hair, and had left a candle burning. The doll had arrived a week later.

But no one had said she would never see her parents again.

It would not be long before a letter came. Yes, they were probably writing it now, saying that Sofya must come home.

Orphan.

Dasha was a pig to tease her.

She stood up. Well, she would take her punishment, and gladly. But she wouldn't wait for it. If they wanted her, they could come and find her. And she wouldn't make it easy: she would go where she was forbidden. To the woods.

Sofya strode towards the little doll and snatched it up. She would take her mother's blessing with her anyway.

Then she ran. Through endless broad corridors resplendent with gilt sofas upholstered in rich silks,

and past mirrors which reflected her flight in pools of candle-lit shadow.

When she had first arrived here, she had thought that all the servants were taken away in the night, to be replaced by an entirely new set of servants the next day. The palace had seemed overwhelming and grandiose to her then; now she hardly noticed the enormous chandeliers, or the rows of agate urns, or the portraits of dead Volkonskys. And she understood that there was more than enough work for the many indoor servants – polishing floors, embroidering sheets, and dusting rooms that were kept as beautiful as if the Tsar himself might visit that day.

Seeing an under-footman, she slowed down and walked at an appropriate speed, looking as if she had just finished her lessons for the day rather than having just bitten her only friend. She smiled meekly to avoid suspicion, and then raced on once the bewigged and liveried servant had been passed.

There it was. The painting. She hated that painting. She closed her eyes as she ran past. But then, she looked, just once, as she always did. And stopped, her chest hurting from the speed of her flight.

It was an enormous hunting scene, as tall as the ceiling and as realistic as if someone had taken off the side of the palace and allowed Sofya to look out into the Russian landscape. It made her palms itch with fear.

All the action was in the middle of the painting, the figures suspended in one dramatic second. A man on horseback, riding at a ferocious pace, bearing down on a wolf. The animal's head was turned in panic towards the

hunting rifle raised above him. Sofya saw the terrible fear in the wolf's painted eye, but also the greedy look on the hunter's face, his body hunched forward in anticipation of the shot. She knew her godfather loved that painting; he had called it 'a complex poem about man and beast', or something that made no sense to her.

Hardly knowing why, she took a deep breath, and touched the wolf. She couldn't help this creature, but she never wanted anyone she knew or loved to feel such terror.

She turned away. She would take the front door to the park. Stepan, the doorman, old and almost as blind as the long-haired borzoi that slept at his feet, would be snoozing in his chair at this time of the afternoon. She could slip out more easily there than anywhere else in the palace.

Stepan was indeed asleep, as she had expected. She reached down and stroked the borzoi's long nose, and the animal thumped its tail on the stone floor. The sound did not disturb Stepan, whose hearing was as poor as his eyesight. It was odd, thought Sofya, that this seemingly gentle dog might once have been used to hunt wolves.

She took her *shuba* and *valyenki* from the large chest in an anteroom, and quickly slipped them on, placing the doll in her deep pocket. Then she walked quietly to where the key to the front door hung on its iron hook. Why the door was locked was anyone's guess. Who would visit the Volkonsky Winter Palace? Dasha had said that the prince's son, Vladimir, was due back from his military school, that her mother was baking pastries for him so it couldn't be long, but Sofya doubted he would ever come. More likely

the prince would visit him in St Petersburg and do whatever business he had to do in the capital at the same time. She had never seen this boy. Sometimes she wondered if Dasha had made him up.

As she slid the key into the lock Sofya heard a bell ring and a voice call out from some room beyond. The prince? Calling for her? The door stuck. She tugged in desperation, knowing it must not open too far or the numbing cold would alert Stepan. An under-footman was running along the corridor, but he hadn't seen her. She squeezed through the door and pulled it shut behind her.

Sofya stood in the trembling half-light of the northern winter morning. She liked to think of ways to describe the palace to her mother, and today she thought she would tell her mother that the stars were like the diamond gaming chips she'd seen the prince throw on to the dark baize of a card table. She stared at the stars fiercely, feeling suddenly quite alone. But it was the cold that made her eyes tear up, that was all. She put her hand in her pocket and felt the shape of the doll through her gloves.

She tied her scarf over her head and tight across her face. Suddenly she wasn't so sure of what she was doing. Winter was savage that year. The Volkonsky estate was remote. There had been talk of wolves in the woods. She was not allowed to go outside alone. But she couldn't stay inside. She'd rather freeze to death than wait for her summons.

She ran along the façade of the palace, where the snow was not as deep, towards the trees. The snow came up almost to the top of her valyenki. She saw figures bundled

up against the bitter cold, trudging out towards a different part of the woods. The estate manager, Baron Herzen, and several men with guns slung over their shoulders. They had three borzois with them, all on one lead. They were going hunting.

She stood behind a tree, waiting until the men disappeared beyond her. Their voices were harsh and boastful. She strained to hear the words, not just the tone of their speech, through her scarf.

Volky! Wolves.

Something more than cold clutched at her throat. She calmed herself. This was just men's talk: who would hunt wolves with borzois in a forest? Anyone knew that the dogs hunted by sight rather than smell, and were so fast and so focused on their prey they had been known to crash into trees rather than take their eyes off the wolf. They were made for hunting in open spaces. But the baron had such airs and graces, and liked to think of himself as a grand landowner still, rather than admit he had lost all his money and now had to work as a servant. He liked these dogs. The prince, happy in his library and sorry for the man's misfortune, indulged his foolish ways.

She looked into the woods. Frost hung in the air, hurting her lungs. She hardly dared breathe. The snow was as heavy and fat on the branches as cherry blossom in the spring. She should go back to the palace. She turned, took a step . . .

'Volk!' A man's voice roared the word through the freezing air.

The crack of a gun!

The demonic yelp of the borzois.

The wolf in the painting. The desperate expression in that painted eye. It was all Sofya could think of, all she could see.

Herzen and his men must have seen that fear too, but in a wolf made of bone and blood and gristle, not conjured out of oil paints. And still someone had shot! She would tear that rifle out of the man's hands. She would yell and shriek and spit in his face!

Blood thumping in her ears, she ran towards the commotion. And then – seeing blood on the snow, hearing the dogs thrashing and the men's cries – she gasped.

At her feet, a wriggling wolf cub, his front paw clearly broken. Sofya had almost stood on him because his fur was white.

The cub's mother was already dead, but the little creature was desperately pushing his face into her side.

'Pick him up!'

It could have been the doll's voice in her pocket, or her mother's voice in her head, or her own voice muffled by her scarf, but she wasted no time as she scooped the cub up from the snow. She clamped her gloved hands tight around his ribcage and held him tight to her chest. He snarled and tried to bite her hand, but her gloves were thick.

She yelled, 'Baron! Keep hold of the dogs! It's Sofya!'

The men appeared, one trying hard to tie up the dogs, crazed now by the sight of the dead wolf. The cub went wild, too, lashing out and desperately trying to heave its body out of Sofya's grasp. She knew that if she dropped

him, the man with the dogs would let them go, and then enjoy telling her it was kinder to kill the cub that way, quickly, than let him starve to death.

‘Put the cub down!’ Baron Herzen raised his rifle.

The cub continued to snarl and snap. She must not let him go.

Sofya mustered all her courage and stared into the baron’s small, bleary eyes. Yanking her head to pull her scarf away from her mouth, she spat in the snow. ‘I don’t take orders from you!’ she shouted. As she turned away, she heard the men roar with laughter.

She ran as fast as she could through the deep snow-drifts, heard the dogs behind her as they fell on the dead wolf’s body. If she could only get to the safety of the palace, she would convince the prince to let her nurse the cub. She would save this creature from the snarling and snapping of the borzois; he would be hers. He was still trying to climb out of her arms, but she held him fast. Exhausted, perhaps, the cub stopped struggling, although she could feel his furious heartbeat through the thickness of her shuba. She told herself she was not being cruel; the animal’s paw would need to heal before she set him free. She would need meat to distract him while she bound it.

She was so absorbed by the cub that at first she didn’t notice the large, covered sleigh underneath the portico of the palace.

Her first thought: *They’ve come to fetch me!*

Holding the cub even more tightly, she called out, ‘Mama!’

Snow started to fall as she ran in the tracks of the sleigh

towards the front door. The skin on her face smarted, but she did not dare risk putting the cub down to rearrange her scarf. Oh, her mother would be so proud of her!

Footmen were unloading strapped leather trunks and cases: the visitors must already have been taken inside.

‘Where are they?’ she said.

‘The library,’ Pyotr told her, then dropped a case in shock as the wolf cub snarled.

She ran through the palace. Dasha was forgiven, now, of course. She would tell her mother the story and they would laugh, and Sofya would ask her mother to buy Dasha a doll just like hers.

The door to the library was open. She could see the prince hugging a tall figure, but couldn’t see Mama just yet.

She stood in the doorway, confused. The blood rushed to her frozen cheeks.

The old prince looked at her. ‘Sofya! What on earth . . .?’

A young man now turned to face her, an expression of quizzical surprise flashing across his bright young face. He was wearing the uniform of the Imperial Hussars.

Sofya felt suddenly furious. How dare he stand there in his uniform, smiling at her!

‘Go away! You’re not my mother!’ she shouted, and the cub leapt and growled in her arms.

The prince put his arms out to her. ‘Sofya . . . Sofya,’ he said, gently.

‘Careful, Papa,’ the young man laughed. ‘She’s armed! Too young for a pistol so she carries a wolf!’

Sofya felt her chin tremble. So this was the young

prince, Vladimir. He wasn't shocked at her appearance, or angry about the wolf cub. He seemed almost delighted that she had arrived, out of nowhere, with a wounded wild animal.

The young Prince Volkonsky rubbed his hands together. 'I know about field dressings!' he declared, his face becoming serious. 'Let's fix up the wounded.'

Sofya understood immediately that he really would help her and the wolf cub. And it wasn't his fault her mother wasn't here, she thought.

And so, Sofya, with her dead mother's blessing in the pocket of her shuba and the white wolf cub in her arms, walked towards Vladimir Volkonsky.

Some moments are like sunlight through a window; you can see them but not hold them. Others have a mass and weight heavier than stars; you can't see them but they affect everything else. We do not always know what sort of moment we are in. Sofya, a young girl with cold-snapped cheeks and frost on her eyelashes, was unaware of the importance of the moment as she stepped towards the young prince. Perhaps it was just as well, for in that sliver of time she bound herself entirely to the Volkonskys. And to their dangerous fate.

The End